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Cohesion as a Command Emphasis Item

by

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Disclaimer

Abstract

Unit cohesion is over-emphasized as a command interest item. Regardless, cohesion has long been considered a military imperative toward unit success, with commanders accepting its pursuit of as one of their duties. Yet the multi-dimensional concept of cohesion is not fully understood, resulting in commanders exerting too much energy on only one facet of cohesion. Furthermore, the effects of cohesion on unit performance are not as clear as leaders believe them to be. In some cases, a highly cohesive unit may actually perform worse than a less cohesive one. Finally, the challenges of creating cohesion amongst unit personnel are greater in this era than in any other. This is part due to deployment schedules and deployment mechanisms but also due to the influence of technology on society.

Cohesion within the military has generally been considered important for success. These sorts of conclusions are typically drawn from soldiers' accounts from historic conflicts such as World War II. Yet, often times, the attrition rate was so great in these wars that there was very little opportunity to become cohesive with one's fellow soldiers. Alexander Bartov's book, *Hitler's Army,* suggests as much, indicating that the Wehrmacht perserved in combat due to its link to Nazi ideology since primary groups rarely had a chance to form.[1] Regardless, modern day commanders have long pursued ways to make their units more cohesive, assuming, of course, that cohesion would enhance effectiveness. These ways include events such as social gatherings, 'developmental' trips, commander's calls, and more. This monograph questions the relative importance of cohesion as an emphasis item. It accomplishes this by first examining how efforts aimed at increasing cohesion are often misguided, failing to interpret the multi-faceted concept of cohesion. Thereafter, it explains how the effects of this multi-faceted concept of cohesion are at best unclear and at worst detrimental. Finally, this paper discusses some of the organizational and societal challenges leaders presently face in the pursuit of unit cohesion.

To begin, this essay assumes that military commanders generally value unit cohesion. Toward that end, in some way or another, these commanders attempt to create cohesion within units under their charge. That is, they attempt to gel their members by seeking ways to form social bonds between them. The logic behind this is that military members who understand, empathize, and care for each other, will have more commitment to the organization and be more effective. This approach, unfortunately, generally addresses only one aspect of the notion of cohesion—social cohesion. Social cohesion is the affective bonding between members; or to expound further, the interpersonal attraction or shared emotional bonding, liking, caring, or

closeness of group members.[2] Socially cohesive groups share emotional closeness and enjoy each other's company.

There is a second facet of cohesion that is often over-looked and misunderstood. It is known as task cohesion or instrumental bonding. Task cohesion is the shared commitment of group members to achieve a goal which requires their collective efforts. A group with high task cohesion contains members who share a common goal and who are motivated to coordinate their efforts as a team to achieve that goal.[3] Members with high task cohesion do not necessarily share high social cohesion. The reason this distinction is important is due to the fact that when thinking in terms of cohesion, most leaders think of it in terms of social cohesion. Unfortunately, studies of the effects of social cohesion indicate a much lower correlation to toward mission effectiveness. On the other hand, studies of the effects of task cohesion indicate a greater correlation to mission effectiveness.[4] Of course, there are exceptions. One study led by Stephen Zaccaro indicated that for groups to succeed, both high task and high social cohesion were necessary. If either aspect of cohesion was low—task or social—no benefit was seen toward task accomplishment. Ultimately, though, Zacarro caveated his findings by indicating that the need for both types of cohesion is likely task dependent.[5] Regardless, it seems likely that unit commanders lack a full understanding of the multi-faceted nature of cohesion, focusing solely on building social cohesion.

A survey of US Army soldiers indicated that soldiers understood this distinction [between task and social cohesion]. The survey showed that even though the respondents believed cohesion was important in combat, they did not necessarily equate it to friendship.   The soldiers made references to unit members which they did not particularly like but whom they were comfortable with in combat situations due to their confidence in both the other members'

abilities and commitment.[6] A similar experience was noted with the integration of black-americans into ground units in Vietnam.[7] The integrated units performed quite well even though social cohesion between blacks and whites was the exception—ultimately, task cohesion is what heightened their performance. With an understanding of the importance of the multi-faceted nature of cohesion, an examination of the effects of cohesion is next.

The effects of cohesion, whether task, social, or a combination of the two, at best are unclear and at worst deleterious. Social cohesion, so often understood as the only type of cohesion, has generally been accepted as beneficial to military units. Previously, this author cited evidence to the contrary. Worse yet, evidence suggest that a high level of social cohesion is actually counterproductive to effectiveness. For example, high levels of cohesion can lead to a phenomenon known as 'groupthink' where members are unwilling to go against the groups' ideas for fear of upsetting the social balance.[8] High social cohesion also can lead to excessive socializing where members are more concerned with social acceptance than task accomplishment.[9] Furthermore, it can also lead to over-identification with the primary group vice the larger organization, which can be counterproductive to the organizational mission. Examples of this might be seen in elite Special Ops units which despise interference from the large service component. As long as the goals of the subgroup and the larger organization are consistent, few problems exist. Problems may surface when the high cohesion primary group becomes disillusioned with leadership (the link to the larger organization) with the potential for horrific outcomes. This was the case with the 'fragging' of junior leaders in Vietnam. Moreover, another study indicated that characteristics of strong primary group commitment (of which cohesion was one characteristic) were not strong predictors of organizational commitment.[10] Put another way, too much horizontal loyalty may inhibit vertical loyalty. This

does not suggest that social cohesion should not exist in military units, however. A moderate level of cohesion is thought to strike the right balance for most tasks.[11]

The inference thus far then may be that task cohesion, not social cohesion, has more of a positive effect on combat effectiveness. There is some accuracy to that statement which must be caveated. Robert MacCoun points out that task cohesion while having some effects, only accounts for a small variation in the total variance of performance.[12] Furthermore, it is not entirely clear which has a greater effect on the other. That is, do successful outcomes increase task cohesion or does task cohesion increase the chances of success? There appears to be more evidence that success in task achievement is more of a predictor of task cohesion than vice versa.[13]

When a group completes a task successfully this does not mean that all members will share in the cohesion, however. Anthony King argues that only the members of a group who contribute to the success of an outcome actually enjoy the task cohesiveness.[14] If this argument has validity, it stands to reason that successful outcomes, which are attributed to select members, may serve to break down the cohesiveness of the group; if not immediately, then certainly over time. Those members who continue to create successful outcomes will likely grow weary of those that are not contributing. Those that are not contributing will feel alienated. All of this can lead to the breakdown of the primary group. Yet, despite the ease with which this scenario is envisaged, war literature abounds to the contrary. There always seems to be a type of individual that flourishes in combat time and time again, while there are also those less courageous souls who manage to stay away from it. It is not uncommon for these two types to be in the same unit without any breakdown in unit performance. Perhaps this is an example which demonstrates the

relative importance of individual personalities on military effectiveness (over group cohesion). At a minimum it suggests that other factors, besides cohesion, are at play.

Regardless of the conflicting literature on the effects of cohesion, leadership's pursuit for some level of cohesiveness is likely to remain the norm. Toward that end, these leaders in the modern era are likely to find its pursuit more difficult than ever before. One reason, at least within the US Air Force, is that Airmen will never obtain the ultimate task cohesive experience with their garrison-based comrades. That is due to the nature of the deployment mechanism currently in place. In the 1990s, the Air Expeditionary Force (AEF) concept arose in response to the closing of many overseas bases post-Cold War. The notion behind the AEF construct was to provide deployment sourcing, predictability, and stability. However, the critical decision on how to source the AEF manpower is detrimental to group and unit cohesion. The Air Force chose to source its AEFs in a piecemeal fashion across units and bases. The result is that Airmen deploy from multiple bases rather than as whole units, joining up in theater with other Airmen from across the Air Force to form expeditionary units to execute the mission. Deploying as individuals clearly provides less of a cohesive, shared experience. Other services attempt to deploy as units but the sheer volume of these deployments and the backfill system will likely threaten the viability of those systems.

Inasmuch as Airmen miss out on the task cohesion with their garrison-based unit, in-garrison commanders will attempt to offset this with other types of cohesive experiences. This too will prove challenging. A recent Canadian study sheds light on a key effect of technology on modern society. The study looked at the effect the internet has on social networking. It suggests that widespread internet usage may lead people to be more connected to society at large, while engaging in less local, face-to-face interaction.[15] Furthermore, it suggests that social

networks might become more numerous but less intense. This may be useful in understanding why tech-savvy Airmen may not experience cohesion with their primary group, or even identify closely with the larger institutional Air Force. The image of today's Airmen logging on and identifying themselves as 'citizens of the world' (as opposed to the Air Force) is easy to envision. Airmen of the pre-internet generations, on the other hand, may have been more likely to experience cohesion with the primary group, and subsequently identify themselves with the Air Force.

Intense training rather than personal familiarity, according to Anthony King, serves as a key element in the forming of cohesive bonds within a primary group.[16] The formula for commanders then is to train intensely to create the greatest cohesive experience. The assumption here is that a unit that trains together becomes cohesive *before* it deploys to its combat mission. The problem with this within the USAF has already been cited above (the USAF does not deploy in whole units). Within the ground services, it is more applicable. Unfortunately, the heavy deployment schedule of the ground services precludes the kind of intense training alluded to by Mr. King. In fact, concerns have resonated throughout the Department of Defense and Congress about the readiness of the military given its robust deployment schedule. A large part of that readiness concern is the lack of training.[17] The type of training that is supposed to contribute to cohesion.

All of this suggests that the US Army COHORT experiment of the 1980s should have been the panacea; it was not. The COHORT concept was designed to increase cohesiveness, increase effectiveness, and decrease first-term soldier turbulence. COHORT soldiers completed basic and advanced training together as one unit with follow-on assignments to the same companies and batteries for three-year tours. This stability was thought to be a key attribute of

cohesion. By 1990, the system was abandoned as a failure. Many studies confirmed that these COHORT units actually rated lower than non-COHORT units for measures of cohesion.[18] The notion that stability was the most important factor in creating a cohesive unit was not proven. Lack of buy-in by unit leadership for the COHORT system and difficulty in unit replacement administration is thought to have been a contributing factor to its demise.[19] The failure of the COHORT system serves as warning beacon—it suggests that developing cohesion is not formulaic. And if the development of cohesion is not as simple as it seems, then assuming a high correlation between cohesion and mission effectiveness may be dangerous as well.

This monograph has not meant to marginalize the concept of cohesion. Primary group cohesion is one of many variables that contribute to military performance. Politics, strategy, planning, leadership, training, intelligence, logistics, individuals and many other factors contribute to military performance. Given the host of other variables, this essay contends that commanders may be guilty of placing too much emphasis on cohesion. In so doing they fail to grasp the multi-faceted nature of cohesion, too often pursuing social vice task cohesion. Moreover, they may not fully understand the ramifications of building a high-level vice a moderate level of group cohesion within a unit. High levels of cohesion may cause over-identification with the primary group which is sometimes at the expense of the larger organization. Finally, in the pursuit of cohesion, military commanders must be aware of the challenges they face that are new to the modern era. Social networking that connects members to the world may in fact disconnect them from the primary group and unit. Deployment processes and frequency may also serve as impediments to cohesion. This essay suggests that commanders with a cohesion-centric focus (aimed at unit success) would be better served diverting energy toward many of the other variables at play.

NOTES

(All notes appear in shortened form. For full details, see appropriate entry in the bibliography)

[1] Bartov, Omar. *Hitler's Army,* 29-58
[2] Kier, "Homosexuals in the Military: Integration and Combat Effectiveness", 14.
[3] MacCoun, "What is Known About Cohesion and Military Performance", 9.
[4] Kier, "Homosexuals in the Military: Integration and Combat Effectiveness", 14.
[5] Vaccaro and Dobbins, "Contrasting Group and Organizational Commitment:
        Evidence for Differences Among Multi-level Attachments", 1.
[6] Kier, "Homosexuals in the Military: Integration and Combat Effectiveness", 14.
[7] Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 279
[8] MacCoun, "What is Known About Cohesion and Military Performance", 9.
[9] Ibid
[10] Vaccaro and Dobbins, "Contrasting Group and Organizational Commitment:
        Evidence for Differences Among Multi-level Attachments", 2
[11] MacCoun, "What is Known About Cohesion and Military Performance", 13-14
[12] MacCoun, "What is Known About Cohesion and Military Performance", 16
[13] MacCoun, "What is Known About Cohesion and Military Performance", 22
[14] King,, "The Word of Command: Communication and Cohesion within the Military", 510
[15] Veenhoff et al., "How Canadians' Use of the Internet Affects Social Life and Civic Participation,"
[16] King, "The Word of Command: Communication and Cohesion within the Military", 510
[17] Dione, "The Petraeus Challenge", A1.5
[18] MacCoun, "What is Known About Cohesion and Military Performance", 20
[19] Ibid

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